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Equality, Fairness, and Responsibility in an Unequal World

Thom Brooks

Abstract: Severe poverty is a major global problem about risk and inequality. What, if any, is the relationship between equality, fairness and responsibility in an unequal world? I argue for four conclusions. The first is the moral urgency of severe poverty. We have too many global neighbours that exist in a state of emergency and whose suffering is intolerable. The second is that severe poverty is a problem concerning global injustice that is relevant, but not restricted, to questions about responsibility. If none were responsible, this does not eliminate all compelling claims to provide assistance. The third is that severe poverty represents an inequality too far; it is a condition of extremity with denial of basic needs. The fourth is that there is a need for an approach that captures all relevant cases – and the capabilities approach and the connection theory of remedial responsibilities are highlighted as having special promise.

Keywords: equality, fairness, global justice, responsibility, severe poverty

1. Introduction

Inequality is found in several different varieties. Each has significance although not always a case of injustice. It is not an injustice that we are unequal in our abilities to entertain or solve complex scientific puzzles, but there may be injustice where the lack of such abilities brings starvation or worse. Severe poverty is a variety of inequality that represents injustice. Fellow human beings that suffer in this condition exist in a state of emergency. The statistics are alarming in their scale and they call for action. About half the world's population lives in conditions of severe poverty. The World Bank estimates that 46% of humanity subsist on less than about \$2 per day. Those below this threshold fall almost 45% beneath it. Severe poverty exposes people to major risks to their future health and livelihoods: for example, one-third of all human deaths have poverty-related causes, or about 50,000 people each day including 34,000 children under the age of five (see Pogge 2002, 2; Pogge 2007, 2). Severe poverty is a major global problem about risk and inequality.

Of course, the considerations raised here have an international dimension rather than a domestic focus. What, if any, is the relationship between equality, fairness and responsibility in an unequal world? These issues are complex and I cannot do full justice to illuminating all of the important relevant considerations.

Nevertheless, I will draw attention to some remarks about this subject that interest me and I hope help contribute to wider discussions on this topic.

2. Negative Duties and Severe Poverty

One popular view is that ‘we’ (or ‘we, the citizens of affluent democratic societies’) have a negative duty to end severe poverty. The view claims that severe poverty is a grave wrong for which we are responsible. This position is exemplified in the writings of Thomas Pogge. He argues that affluent societies knowingly, foreseeably, and avoidably maintain a global order that perpetuates severe poverty through protectionism and international monetary bodies like the IMF and World Bank (Pogge 2002). Affluent societies dictate the terms on which societies with severe poverty must often accept. We, the citizens of affluent democratic societies, share responsibility for this global state of affairs because we elect leaders who choose to maintain this global order. One conclusion is that voters should more actively support candidates who endorse a less exploitative international system.

A second conclusion of greater concern for me here is that we have responsibility for the maintenance of severe poverty elsewhere. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care... Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized (*UDHR*, Articles 25 and 28).

A global order that perpetuates severe poverty might represent a breach of human rights; it would deny the right to an adequate standard of living on any measure and prevent individuals from satisfying their most basic needs.

This view has attracted widespread support, but it has received criticisms as well. Many colleagues, and perhaps most of my students, accept the need for action in ending severe poverty while rejecting the argument that they share some significant responsibility for the continued existence of severe poverty found today. I note this reservation but without an interest in taking sides.

The argument about any negative duties to others in severe poverty captures something compelling about responsibility for global inequalities. If we were responsible for the creation of severe poverty elsewhere, then this provides a strong reason for us to end our responsibility and end severe poverty if we are able. So the issue is not about whether we should end severe poverty if we are responsible for it, but rather whether we are sufficiently responsible for severe poverty.

3. Positive Duties and Severe Poverty

This leads us to a further consideration: should we have a duty to end severe poverty if we were not responsible? If so, then we might be able to sidestep the issue of our responsibility. The classic argument for this view is expressed by Peter Singer in his famous essay 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' (1972). His argumentative strategy is familiar to most academic philosophers: the use of a hypothetical situation meant to confirm intuitive evidence in favour of a specific view about justice. Singer asks us to imagine that we find a child drowning in a shallow pond. Rescuing the child will require our getting wet, perhaps damaging our clothing, and possible inconvenience. Singer believes our intuitions confirm that we should rescue the child in this case. This view is encapsulated in what we might call 'the assistance principle':

if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it (Singer 1972, 388).

The assistance principle focuses on relative moral weights. We weigh the moral costs to ourselves if we do act against the moral costs to the child if we did not act. Singer argues that the moral costs to the child are higher if we did not act – and this measurement supports our saving the child. Note that we should save the drowning child notwithstanding how the child came to start drowning: we should rescue the child regardless of the circumstances leading to this need for rescue. This is often characterized as our having a positive duty to rescue. We rescue where we can and irrespective of whether we are responsible for the situation of need.

Singer's example is meant to confirm something important about justice and any duties to assist others, namely, the general irrelevance of desert, identity, and distance. This is not a claim about their complete irrelevance, but something else. It may be relevant that you are far from me, but only where distance forbids me an opportunity to provide some means of rescue. It is not the distance between us that matters *per se*; it is whether there are available opportunities to provide assistance that matters most on this view. Perhaps I bear no responsibility for the severe poverty endured by a stranger in a distant land. If it were possible for me to provide assistance in some form, then I have a positive duty to do so where the moral costs to me in acting are less than the moral costs to others should I fail to act. If the sacrifice of enjoying the purchase of a new electric guitar would provide funds that might save a life elsewhere, then my sacrifice is almost trivial in comparison to the suffering it would help avoid or prevent. If I am able to contribute to severe poverty relief, then it is morally unimportant whether I am responsible for it, who you are, and how far away you live all things considered.

Many students are compelled by this second view about justice. They are convinced that they have some positive duty to save the lives they can if they are

able to do so (see Singer 2009). But this acceptance is far from universal. A repeated concern is that responsibility can matter. Perhaps severe poverty is an unjust condition of inequality that should end. Why should the burdens for this important task rest only on the shoulders of those who grieve at this suffering?

4. Unified Conceptions

Let me briefly summarise the discussion thus far. Severe poverty is a condition of extreme inequality. We have surveyed two opposing views leading to a similar conclusion on different grounds. The first view is that we have a negative duty to end severe poverty because we are responsible in some way for it. The second view argues that we have a positive duty to end severe poverty where the moral cost to ourselves in acting is less than the moral cost to others from our inaction. Both views make the case for ending severe poverty based upon a view about justice although they disagree on how this should be understood. They want us to choose between ending severe poverty because of our moral responsibility or rather in recognition of relative moral costs.

We are not at a crossroads and there is a 'third way'. I now draw attention to two proposals that illuminate how we might address positive and negative duties. The first is the connection theory of remedial responsibility developed by David Miller (2007). The idea of remedial responsibility is simple; its presentation as a connection theory is more complex. Remedial responsibilities are our responsibilities to remedy severe poverty as understood here. Miller understands severe poverty to be a condition of an emergency. The main problem is not to convince ourselves *that* we should act to end severe poverty, but rather *who* should act. He accepts that Pogge and Singer each address important considerations. Miller's concern is that each offers an incomplete account. Thus, perhaps Pogge is correct to claim that there are global institutions responsible for at least some severe poverty today. Miller claims that it remains true that not every case of severe poverty is attributable to these institutions. One example is the tsunami of 2004 estimated to have killed more than 250,000 people in over a dozen countries and trigger a major humanitarian catastrophe. The fact that not all severe poverty is the responsibility of human behaviour does not render its problems less urgent. Responsibility may play an important role although not the only one. Singer may be correct that we should act from a moral duty to do what we can to end severe poverty, but fail to appreciate that our moral duties may be unequal.

Miller argues for a connection theory to help us determine who has responsibilities to remedy those in most need. He provides a useful list of six different connections. These relate to the causal and/or moral responsibility for the situation, whether another polity shares in some form of community with another in need, and whether a polity has the capacity to assist. We consider the relative set of connections polities have to another in need and consider their weight. No connection is claimed to have any special priority over others

although this wrongly assumes we might ever hold a polity remedially responsible to address problems it lacks the capacity to perform (see Brooks 2011 and Brooks 2014). So we must first consider all polities in light of their potential capacity and those that possess this feature are then considered by the strength of any further connections. The fact any polity *may* provide rescue does not require that it *must* do so. Some may have stronger connections to particular cases and, thus, possess greater remedial responsibilities to act. Negative duties, such as the moral responsibility for contributing to severe poverty, and positive duties, such as the moral responsibility to act where possible, both capture something important and best understood in a coherent, unified account such as this.

A second unified proposal is the capabilities approach championed most prominently by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011). The capabilities approach is a freedom-based account (Brooks 2012). It addresses the capabilities each individual should possess guaranteed by the state. A capability is the ability to do or be. It is meant to highlight a fundamental distinction concerning freedom and justice. The classic example is the difference between someone fasting and another starving. Their difference is captured by the capability someone fasting has to choose to fast and the starving person's lacking capability to choose this situation. Both may have similar actual functionings – for example, both may not have eaten for the same time period – but only one has choice. Moreover, this is a choice about something fundamental to human flourishing, namely, bodily health. Nussbaum provides us with a list of capabilities, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, practical reason, and the social bases of self-respect amongst others (see Nussbaum 2000, 78-80; Nussbaum 2011, 33-34). She argues that the state should guarantee some threshold of capability satisfaction for all. Individuals may choose against exercising certain capabilities, but it should remain their right to choose on these matters of fundamental human concern.

The capabilities approach illuminates a different perspective on severe poverty. The latter is problematic for far more reasons than a condition of hunger which the capabilities approach helps clarify. Severe poverty threatens bodily health and even lives, but also denies other essential freedoms such as our abilities to exercise our imagination and control our environment. The pursuit of higher learning has often been closed to those living hand-to-mouth and not because the latter lack intellectual ability; severe poverty damages our lives physically, intellectually, and worse. The capabilities approach helps us better perceive these often overlooked features essential to our satisfactorily addressing this problem.

Furthermore, the capabilities approach speaks to views of both positive and negative duties. It is an injustice where anyone is not guaranteed a life above some social minimum of capability enjoyment. The fact that someone is beneath this threshold is cause enough for action. But there are responsibilities as well,

including those of our political state, to guarantee all lives have access to at least a minimal threshold of capabilities. All severe poverty represents a failure to secure living standards above a satisfactory capability threshold. There is a duty to remove this failure and improve standards. But some may have a greater role to play than others institutionally and perhaps individually. The capabilities approach then can address different kinds of duties from within a unified account of justice.

There is much more that can and should be said about unified accounts provided by Miller, Sen, and Nussbaum (see Brooks 2015). My aim is merely suggestive and to draw attention to how we might bring together positive and negative duties into a single and coherent view of justice. Its attractiveness is the ability to address more cases of severe poverty than if merely supporting one side or the other.

5. Conclusion

So where does this brief discussion leave us? The first is the moral urgency of severe poverty. We have too many global neighbours that exist in a state of emergency and whose suffering is intolerable. The second is that severe poverty is a problem concerning global injustice that is relevant, but not restricted, to questions about responsibility. If none were responsible, this does not eliminate all compelling claims to provide assistance. The third is that severe poverty represents an inequality too far; it is a condition of extremity with denial of basic needs. The fourth is that there is a need for an approach that captures all relevant cases: I have merely suggested that unified accounts – whether a connection theory or the capabilities approach – has special promise.

Whatever else is understood by equality, fairness, and responsibility in global perspective, severe poverty represents an inequality too far and it pushes us to consider fair procedures to determine any responsibilities for each of us to provide remedy. Eradicating severe poverty does not make us angels and it is one of many moral challenges we face together. But it would be a surefooted step in a better direction we should accept.

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